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Rienzi, der Führer

Rienzi. Torsten Kerl (Rienzi), Martina Welschenbach (Irene), Tobias Kehrer (Steffano Colonna), Daniela Sindram (Adriano), Dong-Hwan Lee (Paolo Orsini), Noel Bouley (Cardinal Orvieto), Clemens Bieber (Baroncelli), Stephen Bronk (Cecco del Vecchio); Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper, Berlin/Evan Rogister; Philipp Stölzl (director), Mara Kurotschka (co-director), Ulrike Siegrist and Philipp Stölzl (sets), Kathi Maurer and Ursula Kudma (costumes), Momme Hinrichs and Torge Møller (film). Deutsche Oper, Berlin, 26 February 2016.

The Deutsche Oper's production of 'Rienzi' was first presented in 2010: it was filmed and subsequently released on DVD (ArtHaus Musik 101 522), in which format it has been reviewed in *The Wagner Journal* (vol. 5:1). The production was revived in the Wagner bicentenary year, and now makes its third appearance on the Bismarckstrasse. It is without doubt an audacious and theatrically brilliant take on Wagner's grand opera, but that brilliance is achieved at some considerable expense to the structure and content of the original. Thus the work is cut to some two and a half hours of music, Wagner's five acts being reduced to a bipartite structure in the process; and director Philipp Stölzl sets the work unequivocally in the 1930s and 40s, with Rienzi re-cast as a fascist dictator.

The staged overture takes place in a large room overlooking mountain scenery, evoking Hitler's Berchtesgaden retreat, whilst the opening scene recalls the cityscapes of Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis', with the chorus masked and costumed as figures from the paintings of Georg Grosz. Rienzi and his henchmen emerge as the pacifying leaders of a rudderless community, and at the end of Wagner's Act 1, in a chilling *coup de théâtre*, the chorus re-clothes itself in quasi-Nazi uniforms and gives a clenched-fist salute. A march for the chorus in the following scene, against the background of an angular, stylised 'R' motif recalling the Nazi swastika, rams home the parallel.

The second part of Stölzl's version sees Rienzi and his henchmen removed from most of the main action in a 'bunker' underneath the main acting area, whilst the carnage he has unleashed takes place above them. The whole drama of Rienzi's changing relationship with the Church, culminating in his excommunication, is excised: it clearly makes little sense in this re-imagining of the work, but it means that an important dimension of Wagner's original is lost, with a consequent diminishing of the complexity of the central character. In this version, Rienzi's famous Act 5 prayer can appear as little more than sanctimonious humbug, rather than the agonising of a character who has been forced into situations beyond his control, or his will: this may suit Stölzl's dramatic vision, but it does considerable violence to Wagner's.

Films and photography play an important role in this production, reflecting the ways in which dictators have made use of these media. The production is built around Torsten Kerl's assumption of the title role: his image is seen in many of the film clips (recalling the style of Leni Riefensthal) which pepper the production, and live cameras are used to project large black-and-white images of Rienzi as he makes speeches to his followers. Kerl gave a sterling account of the title role, producing ringing, golden tone, especially in the first half of the evening (his cry of 'Frei wollt' ich euch haben' as he rejected the crown offered to him by the crowd was spine-tingling), and maintaining a vivid, dramatic presence on stage both in person and in the mimed live film segments. Two badly 'cracked' notes in his Act 5 Prayer indicated just how demanding a role this is, although Kerl recovered well for the remainder of the performance. Martina Welschenbach's Irene began unpromisingly, her voice more that of a soubrette than a classic Wagner heroine, although later her nimble coloratura in the duet 'In unsrem treuen Bunde' was impressive. Daniela Sindram caught the torn impetuosity of Adriano perfectly, her voice projecting smoothly across its full range: her aria 'In seiner Blüte bleicht mein Leben' was a highlight of the evening. The smaller parts acquitted

themselves well, the Colonna of Tobias Kehrer and the Cardinal of Noel Bouley in particular making their every word tell.

The prominent role of the chorus in 'Rienzi' is intensified in this redaction, and the chorus of the Deutsche Oper rose magnificently to the challenges presented to it, singing (and, on occasion, moving) with perfect co-ordination, and producing an impressive level of decibels when required. The orchestra, under Evan Rogister (a protégé of Donald Runnicles) took a while to settle, with the overture and opening scene being poorly-focussed, but thereafter offered a moving account of the score which complemented well the stage pictures created by Stölzl.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton, on whose novel 'Rienzi' the opera is based, wrote of it that 'this Fiction ... though indulging in dramatic situations, belongs as a whole, rather to the Epic than the Dramatic school'. This distinction perhaps highlights the principle deficiency in Stölzl's approach. In producing an intensely dramatic staging of Wagner's opera, he has shorn it of any epic qualities it may possess. His Rienzi is a villain, plain and simple; and our awareness of the historical figures on whom this characterisation is based means that his downfall has a feeling of inevitability to it. If this presentation has an epic aspect, then it is of the Brechtian kind – the possibility of any emotional identification with the characters is undermined, and the piece takes on a didactic quality. Stölzl's interpretation may be removed from the 'Rienzi' Wagner envisaged; but it unquestionably offers a vivid framework within which to hear Wagner's rarely-performed (and, one is left feeling, under-rated) score.